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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine whether separation anxiety proneness in normal preschoolers is associated with distinctive ways of relating to other people. A total of 14 preschool children (6 girls and 8 boys) were rated for separation anxiety proneness by their parents prior to preschool entrance. The preschool teaching staff then rated them for entrance distress each day of the first two weeks of preschool attendance. A clinical psychologist made almost daily observations in the nursery school throughout the school year; in addition, periodic observations, parental interviews, and developmental assessments were made by a child study group composed of another clinical psychologist, a developmental psychologist, and several graduate students. At the end of the year, the clinical psychologist who served as regular observer prepared summaries on each child based on the group's consensus from individual findings. The material from these case summaries was analyzed using a clinical judgmental process. The findings indicated that children who are prone to high separation anxiety have more limited repertoires for peer interaction than other children do, and that their relationships with both peers and adults are dependent ones. It was concluded that separation anxiety in early childhood has important implications for psychosocial development. (JMB)

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Early Childhood Separation Anxiety and Patterns of Social Behavior

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It is widely assumed that attachments infants form for their mothers have major implications for later development. This proposition is supported by numerous findings from retrospective clinical studies. Childhood school phobias, adolescent sociopathy, and depressions in middle adulthood have all been found to be associated dynamically and/or historically with either failures to develop adequate attachments or traumatic separations from early attachment figures. Such studies have generally assumed that attachment and separation histories in infancy and early childhood affect personality development and therefore influence the individual's ability to adapt to demands of events in succeeding years. In particular, children whose early attachment histories leave them prone to experiencing anxiety over separations are thought to develop maladaptive ways of relating to others.

While the importance of separation anxiety as a determinant of personality has been argued for more than thirty years, the development of the trait separation anxiety has received little attention from research workers. Recently there has been considerable interest in the separation behaviors of infants and toddlers, but such behaviors have been treated as situationally determined responses reflecting a temporary strain on established attachment relationships and of interest primarily as a measure of the developmental stage of the attachment bond. Thus, in these currently popular paradigms for attachment research, separation anxiety is treated as a reflection of a state. Individual differences in the manifestation of separation anxiety have been noted, but are incidental to the questions guiding the research and have not been studied extensively.

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The result is a large gap between clinical findings on separation anxiety and infant attachment studies. The clinical studies treating separation anxiety as a trait have been largely retrospective ones, have usually concerned themselves with subjects already manifesting clinical symptomatology, and have dealt with separation anxiety proneness in middle childhood or later. In contrast, infant attachment studies treating separation anxiety as a situational response have focused primarily on the immediate situation and without being prospective, have usually concerned themselves with "normal" samples, and have largely dealt with separation anxiety only during infancy. This gap is sufficiently broad that one might even question whether the separation anxiety trait conceptualized from clinical psychology is related to the separation responses of infants studied by developmental psychologists. While Bowlby (1973) has postulated that these are related phenomena, empirical evidence for the relationship was lacking when he formulated his attachment model.

However, our previously reported research has demonstrated that these two phenomena are in fact linked. We found that preschoolers who manifest distress in response to a specific separation situation (beginning nursery school) tend to be those who manifest greater levels of distress in other separation situations. In other words, even in early childhood the state response may reflect a trait. From a prospective point of view, individual differences in proneness to separation anxiety at the beginning of nursery school were found to correlate with individual differences in separation anxiety manifested four months later. The trait appears to have at least short-term stability. Having empirically demonstrated the postulated relationship between trait and state separation anxiety in early childhood, we began exploring prospectively whether separation anxiety proneness in

normal preschoolers is associated with difficulties in adjustment. In particular we pursued whether individual differences in trait separation anxiety among normal children are associated with distinctive ways of relating to other people as had been demonstrated retrospectively with studies of clinical populations.

Methods

Subjects

Subjects were six girls and 8 boys enrolled in our laboratory nursery school (mean age = 38.8 months at preschool entrance). Fathers of all Ss had at least some college education. Three mothers were employed full time outside the home. Two Ss had divorced parents; only one had no siblings. One S was oriental; all others were white Americans.

Case Study Procedures

Each S was rated for separation anxiety proneness by his parent(s) on the PAR_6 scale prior to preschool entrance and then rated for entrance distress each day of the first two weeks of preschool attendance by the teaching staff on the TSAR (cf. Doris, et al., 1971 for the scales). A clinical psychologist made almost daily observations in the nursery school. Other members of a child study group (another clinical psychologist, a developmental psychologist, and several graduate students) undertook periodic observations, parental interviews, and developmental assessments of Ss throughout the school year. The child study group met regularly to discuss findings and reach a consensus about each S. At the end of the year the clinical psychologist who served as regular observer prepared summaries on each S based on the group's consensus from individual findings.

In the summaries, the clinical observer classified each S's fall entrance response pattern as either High Distress (Hi), Medium Distress (Med), or Low Distress (Low) on the basis of observed behaviors. The Hi pattern was marked by manifestation of a number of distress behaviors including crying and verbal protests. The Med pattern included a number of distress behaviors in the absence of crying or verbal protests, and the Low pattern was one of relatively easy and distress-free entrance. Both these classifications and the summaries were made without knowledge of the results of statistical analyses of the two separation anxiety measures.

The analysis of the material from the case summaries was essentially a clinical judgmental process. The first step entailed review of the case summaries to determine what kinds of conclusions and characteristics they included. They were both detailed accounts of behaviors exhibited in various situations (e.g., a child's behaviors during a fire drill) and summary statements about characteristics manifested by a child. The latter were such statements as "(S) was responsive to invitations from other children to play, but remained unable to approach other children for play throughout the nursery school year." The second step was an inductive process of identifying personality variable dimensions to which the case material could be applied and for which applicable material appeared in every case history. This step was, of course, influenced by constructs in the literatures on child development and developmental psychopathology. Six dimensions were identified which met these criteria and which applied to interpersonal behaviors. These dimensions indicated the degree to which the child's behavior was characterized by: I) Use of objects from home for relating to peers; II) Dependence upon teachers; III) Ability to autonomously

initiate peer interactions; IV) Use of covert or displaced forms of aggression; V) Use of social forms of aggression; and VI) Temporary increases in resistance and non-compliance at home (reported by mothers).

Following identification of dimensions, case summaries were again reviewed and each S categorized according to the frequency of the behaviors rated on the dimensions. This categorization was easy to effect since children distributed themselves on each dimension bimodally. For each child the behavior occurred frequently, or it occurred rarely or not at all. Categorization on each dimension was independent of the others.

Results

Four Ss were classified as Hi, five as Med, and four as Low entrance distress. Mean scores for each classification on the two separation anxiety measures verified the observer's classifications. Mean PAR scores were 12.5, 9.8, and 3.2 for the Hi, Med, and Low groups, respectively. TSAR mean scores were 66.4, 8.4, and 1.0 in the same order. There were no overlaps of TSAR scores between groups.

Table 1 shows the number of Ss in each distress classification who were subsequently categorized as high on each of the six dimensions. It is clear from the table that Ss' entrance distress levels were related to the behavioral categorizations. Hi distress Ss were less likely than Low distress Ss to use objects for peer relating, to display autonomy in initiating interactions with peers, or to use social forms of aggression. In contrast, they were more likely than Low distress Ss to show dependence on teachers and to display temporary increases in resistance at home following preschool entrance. On these five dimensions, Med distress Ss fell midway between Hi and Low Ss while on the dimension of use of covert and displaced forms of aggression both the Med and Hi Ss displayed this pattern more frequently than Low distress Ss.

Discussion

Separation anxiety prone children free of clinical symptomatology do appear to manifest social behavioral patterns distinctive from those of non-separation anxiety prone children. This is consistent with the hypothesis from studies of clinical populations that separation anxiety is dynamically related to patterns of interpersonal relationships.

The non-aggressive behavioral dimensions--dependence upon teachers and ability to autonomously initiate as well as respond to peers--seemed to be closely related dynamically although all dimensions were operationalized independently. In the case summaries, dependencies upon teachers included the need for teacher support for sustained interaction with either peers or play material. In contrast, autonomy with peers was a narrower dimension, referring exclusively to ability to initiate peer interactions. Interestingly, the use of objects from home for relating to peers was predominantly for the initial establishment of interactions with other children. Thus it appears that separation anxiety prone children could not initiate peer interactions even through the intermediary of a play object brought from home. On dimensions involving aggression, some Ss at each level of separation anxiety proneness displayed covert or displaced forms of aggression and manifested temporary increases of aggression at home following preschool entrance. However, high separation anxiety prone children alone showed a complete absence of what we termed "social" aggression. The kinds of behaviors included under this rubric included competitions over materials, status, or privileges and thematic aggressive play. What distinguishes the behaviors in this dimension from those called "covert or displaced" is that they are explicitly aggressive and that they directly involve the child with other people--usually peers. The only interpersonal aggressions reported for high separation anxiety prone children were their resistances towards their mothers at home.

When the findings an all six dimensions are considered in concert, it appears that high separation anxiety prone children have more limited repertoires for peer interaction. Moreover, their relationships with both peers and adults appear to be dependent ones; they are dependent upon teacher's presence to sustain involvements and dependent upon overtures from peers for peer interactions. While the number of cases in this study mandates caution in accepting the findings until further research can be done, separation anxiety in early childhood appears to have important implications for psychosocial development and to have concommitants similar to many that have been noted among older, clinical populations.

Table 1

Number of Ss High on Dimensions X Distress Classifications

		Distress Classifications		
	Dimensions	Hi (n=4)	Med (n=5)	Low (N=4)
I.	Uses Objects for Relating	1	3	4
II.	Dependence on Teacher*	4	4	0
III.	Autonomy with Peers*	0	1	4
IV.	Covert/Displaced Aggression	2	3	1
V.	Social Aggression*	0	1	4
VI.	Home Resistance	4	2	1

* Comparing only the extreme distress groups with the Fisher Exact Test, Hi distress Ss were less likely than Low distress Ss to function independently of the teachers, to initiate peer interactions themselves, and to engage in aggressive interactions with peers (all significant at the .025 level).

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